

SkillsActive Scotland

IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY ACROSS THE OUT OF SCHOOL AND PLAYWORK SECTOR (IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS)

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The basic premise for this Project is that individuals working in the Out of School and Playwork Sector within the Highlands and Islands currently have little access to opportunities to expand their working options or achieve full-time employment. Indeed, general evidence gathered so far suggests that, in many cases:

- people working as sessional pre-school workers are often unclear as to how they can increase the number of weekly hours they work through taking a number of part-time jobs,
- individuals are unclear as to how their industry-specific skills may be transferable and used to obtain work across the range of Out of School Care settings,
- individuals lack an awareness of how they can acquire transferable skills.

Furthermore, subjective evidence again suggests that many employers:

- lack an awareness of the range of skills that individuals working in the Sector can bring to their business,
- often fail to truly value these skills,
- remain unsure regarding career pathways available,
- often remain unaware of the potential benefits to be derived from closer collaborative working.

Consequently, it is felt by policy makers working in the Sector that Colleges, Schools, Training Providers and Careers Agencies need to be provided with accurate information regarding the attractions of working in the Sector and the career pathways available. The contention is that such information would better enable potential new entrants to be briefed and advised, thereby stimulating recruitment; (this would also dovetail into the 'Determined to Succeed' initiative by providing young people with real-life examples of career pathways within the Sector).

Developments made in respect of the issues listed above would invariably bring a number of benefits, including (but not exclusively):

For the Sector:

- Improvements in the levels and diversity of employee competences.
- A more self-sustainable Sector as a result of improved recruitment and retention strategies.
- An increased alignment of training and development with national standards of competence and best practice.
- A re-invigoration of the Sector's Quality Assurance systems.

For the Individuals:

- Real and sustainable career opportunities.
- Greater job satisfaction.

For the Service Users:

- Access to a more available, professional and guaranteed service.
- Reassurance regarding workers' competences and the Sector's Quality Assurance systems.

Given this situation, SkillsActive Scotland applied to the Highland Skills Fund (HSF), (Reference 1), for funding to carry out this Project.

In developing the Project, SkillsActive acknowledged the research and other work already carried out by bodies such as the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Services Council, the Highland and Moray Accredited Training Services (HiMATS). However, it was believed that the small Project proposed by SkillsActive would complement their work by looking in greater depth at the specific issues highlighted earlier in order to provide conclusions and some practical recommendations.

Unfortunately, as detailed later in this Report, (Section 4, Methods), only limited resources were allocated to this Project. Consequently, the Researcher is aware that he has been able to do no more than apply a superficial (and relatively subjective) overview of the issues.

2 PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

2.1 Aim

The Project has four distinct but overlapping component aims:

- To conduct research to quantify the scale of barriers to full employment in the Out of School Care and Playwork Sector in the Highlands and Islands.
- To implement two training and research sessions.
- To produce two Case Studies for distribution to and to be used by Employers, Colleges, Schools and Training Providers.
- To produce of a final report.

The Project application provided comprehensive details regarding methodologies to be employed in respect of the four components. Without reiterating them in detail in this paper, it should be noted that the training and research sessions were to be facilitated by HiMATS and that source material for the two Case Studies was to be identified from these sessions.

3. SCOPE

3.1 Employers

As representatives of the Employers, the views of the following people were obtained.

- Ann Brady, Chief Executive Care and Learning Alliance and Director of HiMATS.
- Sandra Tucker, Executive Manager HiMATS.

3.2 Employees

As a result of her work with Employees over a number of years, Sandra Tucker possesses a sound appreciation of their views and opinions regarding the issues being considered in this project. Furthermore, she devised and is facilitating the training sessions on behalf of HiMATS and, as part of this programme, verified her understanding of Employee views by asking them to complete a short questionnaire.

Consequently, the views of the Employees were obtained by:

- speaking to Sandra Tucker, Executive Manager HiMATS;
- analysing the responses given in the twenty questionnaires returned.

4 METHODS

4.1 Proposed Methodology

The proposed methodology was itemised in some detail in Reference 1.

4.1.1 Fundamental Changes Implemented

In practice, the proposed methodology was necessarily changed because:

- There was a reduction in the amount of time and funds that could be allocated to the Project.
- There was some difficulty experienced in recruiting attendees to the training sessions.
- As a consequence, the timings and venues of some of the training sessions were altered.
- As a result, only one training session occurred before the Project Report deadline.

4.1.2 Consultation with Employers and Employees

Essentially, the above changes meant that the information-gathering process was largely confined to that as detailed in paras 3.1 and 3.2 above.

4.2 Case Studies

An integral feature of this Project was the production of two Case Studies: whilst it was believed that the findings of the meetings with the Employers and Employees would highlight barriers to employment in the Sector it was, nevertheless, anticipated that by recording the views and experiences of specific Employees, the barriers and their implications might become more potently communicated.

Given the difficulties itemised in paragraph 1.1 it became necessary to seek out two people working in the Sector who would volunteer to be the subjects of the Case Studies. Three potential volunteers were identified by Sandra Tucker but only two responded to the request to participate. Both volunteers were interviewed by the Researcher: they were told the purpose of the interviews and then asked for their views and experiences relative to some of the issues identified.

The Researcher has consolidated their responses into a format that he feels best captures the points that they raised. The Case Studies can be found at Annexes A and B. It can be seen that many of the points raised in the studies relate directly to the barriers and issues identified and as listed below.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 General Observations

The meetings with the Employer and Employee representatives highlighted a number of specific points relative to the Project's aims. However, before itemising these, the following general observations are made:

- It was clear to the Researcher that the barriers and difficulties were already well appreciated by both Employers and Employees alike. Therefore, this Project does not pretend to have identified 'unknown' factors but has merely reaffirmed the known case.
- That said, there was a strong perception from all respondents that whilst the barriers and difficulties are well appreciated by people in the Highlands and Islands, this appears not to be the case with many of the Policy makers who tend to be based in the Central Belt. The following reasons were offered:
 - The barriers and difficulties are not known.
 - The barriers and difficulties are known but their impact is not always understood or acknowledged because their consequences create little difficulty for people operating in the environment of the central belt or more urban areas.
- Whilst, if compared with the Employees, the Employers inevitably possess a much more detailed and balanced appreciation of the factors, how they inter-relate and how they sit in relation to national circumstances and strategies, the barriers and difficulties identified were common to both groups.
- Groups and individuals operating in the Highlands and Islands are already working to overcome or alleviate some of the barriers and difficulties being experienced.
- The barriers are often inter-connected. However, it would appear that the causes of the barriers can usually be traced back to the fundamental issues of Recruitment, Retention and Funding.

5.2 The Fundamental Issues of Recruitment, Retention and Funding

The key issue appears to relate to how best to attract, retain and finance the support of people of the right calibre. Ideally, it would be most desirable if teams were made up of fully qualified people who, collectively, would also represent a range of ages and life experiences. However, and over and beyond such criteria, it is considered more imperative that recruits show commitment and enthusiasm for the role and are willing to learn and take advantage of all training and development opportunities.

Considerable efforts are already being made to address these issues; (for example, the work being done by The Care and Learning Alliance, (CALA)).

5.3 Barriers and Difficulties

There are a number of barriers and difficulties that interfere with staff recruitment and longer-term retention. All are well known to people working in the Highlands and Islands and their effects appreciated. Furthermore, many of are inextricably inter-related, making for a complex mix of barriers or difficulties to be overcome by people working at the grass-roots level. However, notwithstanding this complexity, the key barriers and difficulties that were identified are listed below; (although the order of the list does not imply relative degrees of difficulty).

5.3.1 People's Motives for Involvement

Whilst there is no dispute that many workers are keen to work in the Sector and are highly committed to their role there remains a number of people who regard employment in the Sector as little more than a relatively short-term means of part-time income generation; (for example, and whilst not necessarily being a representative sample, twenty five per cent of the respondents to the questionnaires did not view their employment as a longer-term option or desire). For some it appeared to be a curriculum vitae (CV) enhancement course of action towards taking up other employment options whilst others felt that some of the barriers and difficulties would eventually cause them to move on. Of course, this does not mean that they are not interested or committed to the role but rather that their main impetus tends not to be borne of a long-held or specific desire to work in the Sector. Consequently, the combination of barriers and difficulties experienced and as itemised below can quite quickly erode any commitment felt at the outset.

5.3.2 The limited pool available of already qualified people

People possessing specific desirable qualifications tend to be already employed in the Out of School or Playwork areas or in some other Sector-related work. Certainly, there are many people in the community and seeking employment who might possess transferable skills and there are target groups of people who undoubtedly would do so; (for example, ex-military personnel), but again, qualifications alone do not necessarily define commitment to or suitability in the role. Consequently, the prime thrust of any recruitment strategies cannot be geared solely to attracting candidates who already possess Sector-related or even transferable qualifications and experiences.

5.3.3 Perceptions regarding male workers

Changes in the nature, culture and values of society have brought about a situation whereby, sadly, many people in the community view with suspicion any male who desires to work with young children. The consequences of such public attitudes can be a deterrent for some men. Again, this can

interfere with recruitment and acceptance which is unfortunate as, and to generalise, men tend to have lesser problems accommodating many of the barriers and difficulties noted. Furthermore, it has been noticed by Employers that males who have been recruited have been positive in their attitudes and well-accepted and regarded by colleagues and parents alike.

5.3.4 The frequently anti-social hours of the work

Many of the current employees are women with families and dependant children. Unfortunatley, working patterns often interfere with their ability to look after and spend time with their families and children.

5.3.5 The wide dispersal of clients in the Highlands and Islands

The geographical dispersal of employees and clients in the Highlands and Islands only serves to make many of the other barriers and difficulties more acute, particularly when this is compounded by issues relating to the availability and cost of either private or public transport.

5.3.6 Training and development activities

Questionnaire responses clearly indicate that many people regard training and personal development to be one of the keys to securing longer-term employment and career progression opportunities. Together with the issue of improving pay rates, many consider that the provision of appropriate training and the acquisition of qualifications would encourage people to remain in the Sector. However, when planning training and development activities for employees some of the barriers and difficulties noted can compound the problems of effective provision. For example;

- People are less inclined to undertake training that is “extra to the normal working hours”, (see paragraph 5.3.4 above): this becomes even more of a deterrent for those people who do not regard employment in the Sector as a longer-term career option, (see paragraph 5.3.1 above).
- There is some perception that in the move towards the compulsory achievement of the SVQ Level 3 in Childcare, not enough recognition is being given to current competences and experiences; (although a possible solution to this might be that the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is given more prominence.
- The need to widely disperse and repeat training events has major cost, time and travel implications for Providers and participants alike. Consequently, with regard to training, there can be something of a reluctant workforce, even when the targeted promotion of training has been carried out. Furthermore, even when a viable group of trainees is brought together the number of participants is often small, (as perhaps compared with, say, an event held in the Central Belt), and this fact alone can result in the interaction and dynamics of the training provision being diluted. In order to try and overcome these difficulties some imaginative training provision has been given including the use of

'Taster' visits, opportunities to work in different areas, practice exchange sessions and joint meetings between the Out of School and Playwork Practitioners. (Indeed, the evaluation of training activities that have occurred has shown that courses completed have been highly regarded by both Employers and Employees).

5.3.7 The Training and Development Strategy

There is a perception throughout people working in the Highlands and Islands that some people in the Sector, and particularly those working in the Central Belt or responsible for strategic planning, hold a rather hierarchical view of employees and the roles undertaken. It is felt that these people regard the Play work role as being inferior to the Out of School role and that this attitude colours strategic judgements and plans. Various reasons have been mooted for this view; perhaps, for example, in the Central Belt there is a bigger culture of Play Out-of-School Clubs that, (other than for the Inverness area), cannot be matched in the Highlands and Islands generally. Whatever the situation or reasons, there is a belief in the Highlands and Islands, (and this may be based upon perception rather than fact), that the Training and Development Strategy tends to focus more on the achievement of higher-level formal qualifications including Degrees and that more fundamental and less formal training opportunities are viewed less favourably. That said, it is appreciated that everyone will soon be required by legislation to have achieved an SVQ Level 3 in Childcare but, again, other related issues and as mentioned elsewhere in this Report tend to be causes for discontent.

So, whilst people state that they are keen per se to take part in training activities and achieve formal qualifications, there is a feeling that the strategies do not take account of the barriers and difficulties experienced in the Highlands and Islands nor truly acknowledge that in these areas the requirement for multi-skilled staff members is highly desirable if not essential. Therefore, there is some feeling that the training strategy and resultant provision is not necessarily appropriate to the career development and progression aspirations of practitioners working in this part of Scotland. Certainly, some work has been done in the area of on-line training and there is recognition that this medium may have some useful applications, particularly when people are being trained in some of the Sector's administration and management functions. However, whilst being part of the solution, there is general agreement that it is not a panacea and appropriate to all training requirements in that it does not address the issue of trainee isolation nor does the mere acquisition of knowledge necessarily change practice or develop an individual's practical and inter-personal skills.

5.3.8 Finance

At an individual level many feel that the issue of pay scales needs to be reviewed. For example, the unsociable hours may mean that, whilst at work, an Employee incurs childcare costs. Again, this factor should be considered in the context of other barriers such as Employee motivation, (see para 5.3.1

above), whereby other sources of employment and finance-generation may be more attractive.

The Researcher noted a universal belief that more strategic attention should be given to the funding of appropriate training. Many people said that they currently use their Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) to subsidise the training costs or that these are borne from other sources but that it is still difficult to fund the training being presently undertaken. As a result, people could not see where funds could be found to meet the anticipated increased costs associated with achieving the SVQ.

Beyond this specific funding issue, there was a more overarching concern regarding the resources that were likely to be available to continue the services as currently provided. A good proportion of the present provision is directly or indirectly subsidised and there was a general belief that this situation could and would not continue indefinitely. Consequently, people were of the opinion that the whole of the Childcare and Education Strategy needs to focus upon creating a cohesive structure that will ultimately lead towards the achievement of self-sustainable operations.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Despite it being assumed that this Report and the Case Studies could be used to help promote the attractions of working in the Sector, the findings actually indicate that, for many people, the barriers and difficulties may be deterrents and overshadow the more positive features of working in the Sector.

So, and if nothing more, this Project has been a vehicle for some people to formally raise and air their issues and concerns. Hopefully, it will also provide yet more management information during further strategy planning meetings although it is probable that it will do no more than reinforce the issues already known and under discussion; (as, for example, during the OUT2PLAY – SkillsActive 5th Annual Playwork Conference held recently at Lord's Cricket Ground).

Certainly, at a local level, many people and organisations in the Highlands and Islands are already working hard to try and counter the barriers and difficulties associated with recruitment and retention. For example, CALA is supporting training and employment that:

- Incorporates 'Taster' sessions;
- Provides experiences in a range of areas, (before attempting to recruit people to permanent employment or as Contract staff);
- Provides work that offers a variety of roles;
- Ensures the availability of flexible and imaginative training opportunities, (although this in itself can put additional demands upon the Providers);
- Endeavours to match the needs of the client, (whilst acknowledging the skills and experience bank of the staff available);
- Considers, where possible, the career progression aspirations of the employees.

However, and despite such efforts, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the generation of any longer-term and sustainable developments and change activity will only result from a review of strategic thinking, planning and financial investment.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 General Principle

As an overarching principle, it is considered that there needs to be a reaffirmation that high-level commitment and strategic thought will be applied covering the key issues of:

- Recruitment and Retention.
- Career Pathways.
- Funding.
- Reward and Recognition.

... within the context of creating a self-sustainable service.

If, as a consequence, the barriers and difficulties as raised were addressed it would be easier to promote to people the positive benefits and opportunities to be found by working in the Sector.

Such commitment and the strategic planning process should necessarily draw together representatives of all Stakeholders: (examples might include the Scottish Executive, Local Government, Local Enterprise Companies, Childcare Partnerships, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the Sector Skills Council (SSC) and Playwork, Employer and Trainer Community (PETC) Groups).

7.2 Some Specific Consideration

When applying such strategic thought, it is recommended that the following factors are taken into account.

7.2.1 Status, Respect and Acknowledgement

There needs to be a re-education of attitudes so that all people working in the Out of School and Play work Sector are afforded equitable respect, acknowledgement and appreciation; (this could, perhaps, be done by fostering and encouraging greater contacts between people operating in different parts of the Sector; - for example, via Practice Exchange sessions, Visits, etc.).

7.2.2 Pay and Remuneration

Pay and remuneration needs to be credible and better reflect the knowledge, skills, talents, qualifications and commitment shown by the Employees. Furthermore, there should be clear career progression pathways defined and these effectively managed and supported by competent line Managers. Certainly, Contracts and levels of pay and remuneration should recognise the realities of the marketplace in which potential recruits may be drawn to other employees by work-life balance factors such as offers of more family-friendly

hours, more predictable work rosters, less travel, reduced personal overheads and a less taxing working environment.

7.2.3 Training and Qualifications

Reference has already been made to the overarching Training Strategy. However, within this it is felt that there needs to be a fundamental review and reaffirmation of the importance of base-level training, greater opportunities given to people to acquire a range of accredited and recognised qualifications and also the positioning and merit given to transferable skills and how these might best be recognised. The SVQ Level 3 will go some way to addressing this issue but associated issues of concern to Employees and which should be addressed include:

- Training and development time being set aside within a person's routine working hours. People acknowledge that they are invariably paid to take part in training activities but this is not regarded as conducive when it interferes with their other priorities, (see paragraph 5.3.4).
- The issue of APL, (see paragraph 5.3.6).
- Managers being adequately trained and competent to effectively lead and manage their team members including the implementation of a structured and supported process of performance review and personal and career development.

7.2.4 Contract Agreements

Reference was made earlier to the motives of candidates and it was indicated that a key indicator of longer-term commitment and effectiveness is the desire, enthusiasm and willingness shown by recruits to their personal development. There may be a need to review the Recruitment and Selection Strategy and process.

It was suggested to the Researcher that there may be merit in formally highlighting an Employee's training responsibilities in the form of a contractual-type agreement in which the employee undertakes to actively take part in personal development activities as mutually agreed with their line Manager. On the other hand, it could be argued that this should be a routine part of a person's Contractual obligation anyway and that, if the selection process is adequately robust, only truly committed and motivated individuals would be offered appointments.

That said, there was some concern from respondents that current training and development opportunities are not always promoted or marketed effectively. Consequently, there may be benefit in reviewing:

- how effectively opportunities are presently being communicated;
- whether or not the training on offer is adequately balanced to cover the whole gamut of training necessary to prepare people for higher level appointments within the Sector.

7.2.5 Management Competency

It was clear from the responses given to the Researcher that people's perceptions of their role, prospects and the size and influence of the difficulties being encountered can be greatly influenced by the standard of leadership and management competence being displayed by their line Managers. Consequently, as part of the Training and Development Strategy, it may be worthwhile to review:

- the criteria for selecting and appointing Managers;
- how their personal performance in the role is managed;
- how their leadership and management skills are developed in the role.

7.2.6 Evaluation

It was noted earlier in the Report that a number of organisations are already involved in initiatives associated with the Sector. As part of the information-gathering process in support of strategic planning, it is recommended that the success or otherwise of these activities be systematically evaluated.

Reference

1. HSF/HIE 2007/08 Project Bid by Skills for Business: Improving Employability across the Out-of-School and Play-work Sector.

CASE STUDY ONE

Background

A twenty-one year old Employee who has been working in the Sector for only a few months. A Graduate, she is intending later this year to start a Teacher Training course and saw work in the Sector as a means of enhancing her CV, gaining some experiences that would no doubt be of benefit to her in her future career and, not least, as a form of generating an income prior to entering full-time training. When recruited she had and still has no long-term plans to work in the Sector.

Whilst some of the following perceptions will no doubt have been tainted by her own motivations and the working practices being experienced, they do show that many of the barriers and difficulties highlighted are active and causing problems in at least some parts of the Sector.

Her views as an Employee

When asked about potential barriers to employment in the Sector as a longer-term option she cited many of the issues listed in the main body of the Report. In particular, she remarked upon:

Management Effectiveness

Her first Manager was very helpful and friendly but left within a few weeks of her starting employment. However, the replacement Manager was less impressive and caused people to question not only her management abilities but also her level of experience and the level of preparatory training that she had received. The interviewee said that as a leader she was far from inspirational and, without listing in detail the circumstances of her perceived shortcomings, it was clear that the interviewee considered her to be disorganised, only reacting to situations rather than planning, providing little encouragement and no real training opportunities, being inconsistent in her dealings with different people and “... *making sure that you know that she’s your senior*”.

She also felt that her efforts were not really appreciated anyway; “*We’re constantly being pestered about shifts and asked to cover for other Clubs so when we get there we’ve no idea about our colleagues or the location*”. Again, she felt that from her point of view and that of many of her colleagues, planning appeared to be shambolic and working practices did not foster a sound team focus.

Pay.

Her view was encapsulated in the following comment:

“Pay isn’t too bad but I’m not getting paid for all the hours that I do as the Manager is cutting back people to cover the shifts and I invariably do more hours than I’m paid for. I’ve raised it with her but nothing’s happened. It gets to you in the end”.

Training.

She said that some training had been available but that “it always seems to be at night and in your own time. I suppose I should be more committed but, really, after a full day at work it’s the last thing that I want to do; I’ve got other things in my life”.

Working Hours.

She explained that she was not keen on the “unsociable hours and, more than that, they’re ‘bitty’ so, as I said, I do more than I get paid for anyway but my week is not straightforward. I’m quite lucky as I don’t have to travel far but I know that for some people it’s a real issue”.

CASE STUDY TWO

Background

An Employee who has been a Playworker for two years and was recently promoted into a Co-ordinator's role. She has held a long-term desire to work in the Sector and is hopeful for progressive career opportunities.

Compared with Case Study One her perceptions were much more optimistic: perhaps because of her motives for working in the Sector she was much more committed to the role but she also viewed her Managers and the working environment in a much more positive light. She recognised that difficulties did exist and had some concerns for the longer-term, financial viabilities of the Service. She believed that sooner or later there would be pressure for the Service to be self-sustainable and that, if strategic plans towards the end were not put into place, Centres would inevitably close. However, for now, such issues did not negate for her the positive features of working in the Sector.

Management Effectiveness.

Unlike Case Study One, she was most complimentary about the abilities of her Managers and appeared to take them as role models.

Career Aspirations.

She was keen to progress in the Sector and possessed a detailed knowledge and understanding of the training and qualifications that would support her ambitions.

Training Opportunities.

Perhaps again because of her motivation and commitment, she was eager to take any training opportunities made available to her and could easily explain how training that she had done had helped her and was being applied in her current role. She was aware that career progression aspirations required that she developed her administrative and management skills but it was not clear to her that there existed the system for creating a structured, supported and monitored personal development programme.

She felt that training opportunities were reasonably adequate but anticipated that these would increase as people progressed towards achieving their SVQ Level 3 and subsequent qualifications. She acknowledged that the training normally occurred outside routine working hours but said that people were paid whilst they were training and considered that, if people were truly committed to a career in the Sector, the achievement of the qualification outweighed this issue. However, she thought that if people were eventually required to find a significant amount of money towards the cost of their training, this would start to deter would-be recruits.

So, a key issue of concern to her was how training would be funded. She explained that people currently use their ILAs, that some training is subsidised and also was complimentary about the training made available through HiMATS. However, she foresaw difficulties ahead for people if they had to find extra funds in order to achieve national qualifications.

Recruitment. She said that in her view, (and felt that this would also be the view of her Managers), it was better to recruit fully committed and motivated individuals who did not necessarily possess appropriate qualifications. Such people could then be trained from induction onwards with a focus on local needs and the person's personal aspirations. In respect of male recruits she acknowledged that some people had reservations but felt that this was largely misguided: she had found male colleagues to be very good and in a largely female-dominated environment regarded them as invariably being sound role models for the boys.

Pay. She felt that pay scales needed to be reviewed, particularly given that the anti-social working hours sometimes meant that employees, when they came to work, were often having to pay childminders to look after their own children. Furthermore, she knew of colleagues who travelled considerable distances so that they incurred extra cost and travelling time.